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Nationalism at Its Nastiest

Azerbaijan is no Lithuania. True, resurgent nationalism arouses people in the Caucasus just as it arouses the Baltic republics. But there the comparison ends — and the trouble for Moscow begins.

Nationalists in Lithuania are struggling to wrest independence from Moscow by nonviolent, political means. Nationalists in Azerbaijan also talk of independence, but their protest includes bloody pogroms against their Armenian neighbors. Nor do Azerbaijani nationalists limit their actions to Soviet Azerbaijan. They transgress the border with Iran to make common cause with Azerbaijanis there.

Mikhail Gorbachev seems prepared to bargain with Lithuania's nationalists. But Azerbaijan's violent nationalists leave him no choice but to send in the troops.

The nationalism now surging from Omsk to Tomsk is an understandable reaction to decades of forced assimilation. Stalin redrew borders, relocated populations and suppressed cultural and religious differences, all in the name of internationalism. But ancient national aspirations did not disappear.

This week's massacre in Baku, of predominantly Christian Armenians by Muslim Azerbaijanis, shows nationalism at its nastiest. Generations of religious hatred erupted in spasmodic violence two years ago as armed Azerbaijanis rampaged through the town of Sumgait and slaughtered 32 people, mostly Armenians. After the 1988 earthquake that killed 25,000 Armenians, Azerbaijanis blocked railways to Armenia, holding up aid. Now the rivals vie for control of Nagorno-Karabakh, an

Armenian enclave that Stalin incorporated into Azerbaijan in 1923.

The Armenians sought protection from Moscow. Mr. Gorbachev first resisted but renewed strife forced him to intervene. The Azerbaijanis added to his unease by declaring their interest in carving out a state on both sides of the national border. This was a clear threat to Iran's territorial integrity and its warming relations with the Soviet Union. Teheran asked the Soviets to beef up border patrols.

Mr. Gorbachev and his reformist Kremlin allies are prepared to tolerate, even encourage, moderate nationalists who challenge central control and demand autonomy. But Moscow rightly feels that, in a polyglot country with 104 different nationalities, ethnic violence is beyond the pale.

Azerbaijan dramatizes Mr. Gorbachev's larger dilemma. To generate economic thrust, he wants to shift power from Moscow's stodgy bureaucracies to the regional republics. But how can he do this without unleashing nationalist hatreds and irredentism? The problem is illustrated by the struggle over Nagorno-Karabakh, a region as big as Long Island with a population of 160,000.

Putting either Azerbaijanis or Armenians in charge would leave one people at the mercy of the other. Moscow has to assume direct control. But that runs counter to Mr. Gorbachev's desire for devolution. And the troops, once introduced, will be difficult to extricate. Nothing so challenges Mr. Gorbachev's resourcefulness, and his fragile coalition of reformists and moderate nationalists, as the flow of blood in the Caucasus.